

# SUPERPOWER POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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## A Meeting with the PLO Representative in London

It was from a drab, drizzly day in London, that we entered the PLO delegation. We were offered coffee and Arabic newspapers in a warm, smoky waiting room. Neil Sheldon and I had had the good fortune to get to the final of the *Observer Mace* debating competition. Our task was to oppose the motion that “This House believes that the power of the United States had increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished”. In order to prepare for this, Dr Buck and I had been to a meeting about “American foreign policy in the Middle East”, where we were lucky enough to meet Mr Afif Safieh, representative of the PLO in London. To our great surprise, he generously invited us to come and discuss the debate with him. Such opportunities are not to be missed.

The first pillar of our argument was to be that, in fact, the American economy is no longer expanding, and so its power is not increasing any more. Mr Safieh acknowledged that there are two schools of thought about superpower politics. One school of thought is called the declinists: those who advocate that over the last decade or more the relative power and influence of the USA has rather declined. They argue that during the last few years we have witnessed an emergence of other centres of power – Japan, Europe, and other countries. Even though the Americans maintain military supremacy, in a pacified world, military supremacy is not the only strategic factor for the measurement of power and influence, and you have to look at the emerging poles in the international system.

There is another school of thought which says that the American power is the hegemon: unparalleled, unrivalled, unchallenged. The Soviet Union as an empire, as a pole, has been diminished, after a double assault on its cohesion and strength. The first was an ideological assault during the Carter period, demanding human rights be observed. The second assault came during the Reagan period, with the arms race. This school of thought argues that America, the West, has won. We are witnessing a decline of the Soviet Union, and since all the other poles are of an economic nature, civilian powers, that don't constitute any serious competition.

I could sense that, instinctively, Mr Safieh was more convinced by this second approach. “During the last five years, we have moved beyond the bipolar system, where you had two superpowers of equal strengths, or at least of sufficiently dissuasive capabilities on either side to create a sort of global equilibrium. We have moved from the bipolar system – not towards a multipolar system that I for one would have preferred, but towards a monopolar system where, in a way, Washington appears to be the contemporary Rome, managing the globe”.

*But did the power of America really increase as a result of the Gulf war? Isn't power really shifting to the strong economies of Japan and the EEC?*

“Before the Gulf Crisis, tensions were rising in relations between the USA and Japan, the USA and EEC. Because in a period of protracted peace, it's the ally that becomes the competitor. I believe that many in Washington wanted the political confrontation in the Gulf, so that in international relations military power will again have primacy in the hierarchy of power. In periods of peace, it's the economic achievements, the productivity, and the exportation levels that obtain primacy. In periods of military confrontation the military dimension regains primacy. So I think that in decision-making centres in America, the thought of reasserting American supremacy was not far off. In a way they made it understood to the Germans, the Japanese and the EEC countries, who is 'Numero uno'.”

*Is it in the interests of the Palestinians that the military dimension should regain primacy?* Recently, the PLO denounced terrorism. The UN charter allows any people oppressed by alien occupation to resort to armed struggle. But the major components of the PLO to which Mr Safieh belongs have deliberately decided not to resort to armed struggle, because there are now avenues for diplomatic transactions. Mr Safieh told us.

I am in favour of the non-violent school because I think that non-violence is more destabilising than violence. Since Israel is the predominantly military power in the area, its strongest aspect is in the military dimension. When the Intifada maintains its mainly non-violent features, it immobilises 99.9 percent of the Israeli military capabilities. Israel can neither deploy its nuclear capabilities, nor its navy, nor its aviation, nor its tank force. They still use tear-gas and bullets, which are extremely lethal, but this is only 0.1 percent of their military capabilities. Faisal Hussaini once said, “If ever Tyson – the world champion in heavyweight boxing – comes to challenge you, you don't invite him to the boxing ring. You invite him to the chessboard, where you have a decent chance to win.” In the boxing ring, you are the sure loser.

*How does American foreign policy affect Middle Eastern affairs?* Mr Safieh told us: I've always said that the key to war and peace resides in Washington. There are two schools of thought again on the American-Israeli relationship. One speaks of an Israeli America, and the other speaks of an American Israel. One says it is the global superpower that dictates policies of its regional client, and the other says it is the global power that adopts the regional preferences of its client state. So does America dictate policies on Israel, or does America adopt Israeli policies? I believe that both those schools of thought are correct, but at different moments in history, and at different moments of that complex pattern of relations between the global protector and the regional client. I tend to believe that more frequently, it is the second school of thought which is more accurate. Because the Middle East is part of the domestic debate (and we know how strong Israel actually is in the domestic American arena). The Americans often get coaxed into adopting the Israeli strategy, policy, and preference.

This was manifest during the Reagan period, which many call the Reagan “siesta”. The Irangate event illustrates this phenomenon, of America adopting the regional preferences of its client state. In Israel, the Ben Gurion doctrine says, “Since we live in a hostile environment, we have to make an alliance with the environment of our environment.” This strategy aimed to make a network of alliances with Turkey, Iran,

Ethiopia, whatever the nature of the political regime in power. It has nothing to do with the ideological policy, be it of the Shah or Khomeini. What happened in Irangate is the following: the Americans were convinced to pump arms and money into revolutionary Islamic Iran against Iraq, the regional competitor of Israel. At no moment was American strategy to help promote the chances of the Islamic revolution. Its strategy was to assist the Israelis. Here is a situation where the Americans adopt the Israeli strategy and preference, even if it is in contradiction to their own national interests.

In the Gulf crisis, Mr Safieh felt that “Rome was in Tel Aviv, and Tel Aviv had succeeded in mobilising Washington as its own regional belligerent Sparta. The Israelis succeeded in having the Americans in a situation where they would crush the regional competitor of Israeli hegemony, which was Iraq.”

*Have the USA-USSR regulations affected the emigration of Soviet Jews into Israel?* Mr Safieh replied, “I believe that we the Palestinians have suffered from both Soviet strength and Soviet weakness.” At moments during the three decades of supposed Soviet strength, the Israelis convinced the Americans that they were the strategic asset capable of containing Soviet expansionism. They took advantage of the Soviet pseudo-strength, in order to be flooded with money and weaponry. Then they took advantage of the Soviet weakness by extorting from the Soviets all possible concessions, including unlimited Soviet Jewish immigration towards only Israel.

The turning point took place when Bush met Gorbachev in Malta. It is then that serious decisions concerning the Soviet Jewish migration were taken. Up to the Malta summit, more than 90 percent of the Soviet Jews that were leaving the Soviet Union were going elsewhere than Israel-Palestine. And less than 10 percent were choosing to go to Israel-Palestine. After the Malta summit, the proportions were exactly reversed: over 90 percent were ending up in Israel-Palestine, and less than 10 percent were able to go elsewhere. The Americans were pressured by the Israelis to ensure that Soviet Jewish emigration should be channelled only to Israel.

The freedom of choice of the country of destination has always been a Jewish concern. This concern has been violated because now they are being channelled like cattle only to Israel. So the pro-Israeli lobby prevailed over a traditional Jewish concern, because it wanted to give an advantage to Israel: having one or two million additional citizens. The Malta summit was accompanied by the Western countries, mainly the USA, but also EEC countries, reducing their quota of reception for Soviet-Jewish migration. At a moment when it had succeeded in pressuring the Soviets to open doors and let Soviet Jews leave if they do desired, the West closed its doors for those Soviet-Jewish migrants who would have preferred to emigrate to a Western country.

*How do the Palestinians feel about President Bush?* Mr Safieh believes that “We in the the Arab world always prefer an American President that is strong and comfortable, whereas the Israelis prefer a vulnerable American President. This is why we are encouraged by the popularity rating of Bush, even though we think the reasons of his popularity are of a questionable nature. But we are happy that he is so popular, and that he can (if he so wanted) be decisive, assertive and confront any lobby that wants to obstruct his intentions. I have always said that the best American President for the Middle East would have the ethics of a Carter, the popularity of a Reagan, and the strategic audacity of a Nixon. But we have to do with what we have. I don’t think that

Bush has the ethics of a Carter, he has the popularity of a Reagan, the question is does he have the strategic audacity of a Nixon?"

I am encouraged by one or two factors, which are the following. Bush and Baker are comfortable today, electorally speaking, and there is no serious challenge around the democratic side. Number two, they form a cohesive team, unlike in previous administrations where there was constant rivalry between the White House, the National Security adviser, the State Department man, and the Pentagon. Stanley Hoffman spoke of 'institutionalised pluralism' where an undecided President Carter was subjected to conflicting advice. But this team is very cohesive, and they owe nothing for their first election or for the re-election to the pro-Israeli lobby. So if they so wanted, they can be extremely decisive and assertive." A Zionist leader, Nahum Goldmann, commenting critically on Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy, said that "It seems to me that diplomacy in the Middle East is the art of delaying the inevitable as long as possible." Already for him in the early seventies, the inevitable was the Palestinian factor. In one of his books he speaks of a discussion he had with Moshe Dayan. He tells him, 'Moshe, the Americans up to now give you much aid and some advice. You take all the aid and you leave the advice aside. What would happen if ever the Americans were to tell you, "You can only take the aid if you also take the advice"?' and Moshe with resignation tells him, 'Then we have also to take the advice'. So linkage there has potential: linking American aid to American advice.

Mr Safieh explained. "Since we live in a monopolar world, where Washington resembles Rome, I think we all have to work, as Palestinians, Arabs, the peace camp among Israelis and within Jewish communities, the Europeans and others, on the formulation and the elaboration of American foreign policy towards our area. That means that we have to convince the Americans to reconcile their power and their principles. We believe that self-determination is a cornerstone in the American political philosophy. It means the freedom of choice of one's form of government, one's governors, and government by consent, not through coercion; government with democratic representation, not through bureaucratic repression. So we have to persuade and pressure the Americans to link their aid to their advice in their relationship with the Israelis."

*If American power were to be diminished, how would it be done?* Mr Safieh asserted, "I am of the belief that the only credible alternative today to American hegemony is UN supremacy. But the UN also needs to be liberated; as we witnessed during the Gulf crisis, the UN was very manipulated by the US. They bought votes and vetos. When Gorbachov had his own initiative on ending the war, during the last days of the war, Bush had a very condescending attitude, and was the first to answer 'No'. That proposal was submitted to the International Community, and to my knowledge, Bush is only the President of the USA and not yet the Secretary-General of the UN."

"You have to strengthen the political philosophy on which the UN system is based, and to have actors decided that they should play their legitimate share in international decision-making. However, some actors are very vulnerable: the Soviet Union needs economic aid, investments, and capital, so you can buy its vote and its veto; China is in an identical situation. The rivalry between the UK and France often does not project an image of a cohesive Europe. It speaks with two different voices. Often British diplomacy's first aim is to topple the French initiatives and the French diplomacy's first task is to show that the British initiative is only British and not EEC. So the Americans

are in a very comfortable situation; how desirable that is, is a question of personal inclinations.”

*If the UN is the alternative, how in practical terms can power be transferred to the UN, given the economic strength of the US and the weakness of the USSR?* Mr Safieh concluded. “This is where I think that the second pillar of the international system is no more the Soviet Union, but the EEC. Those other pillars of the international system have to become more assertive. Europe more cohesive, Japan more assertive. Now, with the renewed attempts for the quest for peace in the Middle East, Bush has the opportunity to play statesman, and that’s the challenge. He played the policeman successfully. Will he play the role of the International Statesman?”